



Ficus spp. – Houseplant Favorites

The *Ficus* genus is large and varied, with more than 850 species native throughout the tropics, with some spread into temperate zones, notably the edible fig (*F. carica*) which has been cultivated since ancient times. A fascinating and ubiquitous aspect of all *Ficus* species is their specialized flowers that are hidden inside its fruit – a fig! *Ficus* has mutually evolved with specialized wasp species which enter their fruit to reproduce and simultaneously to pollinate the tiny flower structures within. The tasty, thready interior of fresh, edible figs is actually hundreds of tiny seeds. *Ficus* houseplants, however, will never produce seeded fruits because they lack their wasp pollinator. They will instead pour all their vigor and energy into producing beautiful structure and varied foliage to bring years of enjoyment. Here's what you need to know:

Light: Bright, indirect light

Temperature: Low to average: 60° - 75° a steady 68° is optimum

Moisture: Even; let dry somewhat before watering

Fertilization: Every two weeks at ½ strength, spring through fall; nothing in winter

Humidity: Average room humidity

- All *Ficus* species prefer very bright, indirect light, such as an east-facing window or set some distance from a south- or west-facing window. Failure to thrive most often occurs when light levels are too low. A few of them – fiddle-leaf fig, banyan fig, and rubber plant – may be summered outside from late spring to early fall, but they should be sited where they get morning sun and afternoon shade, and only when they have been slowly acclimated to higher light conditions.
- These are plants that like to dry out *slightly* between waterings – when the top 1-2” of soil is dry, it's time to water. The humidity of a room will affect how often you need to water and using a humidifier during the drier winter months is helpful. Your watering schedule will also vary as the seasons progress – spring and summer are times of active growth and your plant will need more moisture. This is also the time to lightly feed your plant: every two weeks at ½ strength from March to September but nothing in winter.
- Consistent temperatures are also important, so keep your plants away from heat and air conditioning vents as well as drafty windows and doors. High traffic areas and cramped conditions are also a threat because bends and cuts may cause permanent foliage damage, especially for the large-leaf types such as fiddle-leaf fig and rubber plants. Give the pot a quarter turn every other week to keep the plant from leaning toward the light source, and gently wipe dust from the leaves with a damp cloth to ensure photosynthesis is not interrupted.
- Most *Ficus* species take well to pruning, but care must be taken since they all have a sticky, whitish sap that can be a skin irritant and may cause staining. Single-stemmed plants may be trained into a tree form by carefully pruning the growing tip. It may take several tries before your plant begins branching. Always prune in early spring before the flush of growth in the stem and leaves. Alternately, several single-stems may be planted together in a shorter, bushy form. In either case, all *Ficus* species prefer slightly cramped root conditions so delay repotting until it absolutely outgrows its pot with roots coming out of the drainage holes or circling the top of the pot. Once it reaches its maximum size, switch to merely topdressing with fresh potting soil every other year.

- **Asian Council Tree or Lofty Fig** / *Ficus altissima* – Large, sharply pointed leaves are variegated with irregular chartreuse borders, lime green splashes and dramatic yellow veining in a densely branched display. Easy to care for and performs well in bright, indirect light. Responds well to occasional pruning; may develop aerial roots. Keep from overwatering and avoid moving plant once positioned. Approximate Mature Indoor Height: 4-8’ and Width: 2-4’
- **Banana Leaf Ficus** / *Ficus maclellandii* ‘Alii’ – Long, glossy, saber-shaped leaves droop from slightly arching branches, creating an open, irregular crown, a bit like bamboo. Shrubby and full when young, the lower leaves eventually drop off, revealing a bare, woody trunk and giving a palm-like appearance. Easily pruned to shape as a topiary or allow to grow a bit wilder. Needs bright, indirect light, loves warmth and humidity but avoid overwatering and provide a permanent place to settle. Approximate Mature Indoor Height: 8-10’ and Width: 4-6’
- **Banyan Fig** / *Ficus benghalensis* ‘Audrey’ – Densely branched in large, velvety, oval-shaped dark green leaves with striking light green veins, this native of India resembles the ubiquitous fiddle-leaf fig but is easier to care for, performing well with bright, indirect light and consistent watering. May be coaxed to branching with judicious pruning once desired height is obtained. Approximate Mature Indoor Height: 4-8’ and Width: 2-4’
- **Creeping Fig or Climbing Fig** / *Ficus pumila* syn. *Ficus repens* – Small, heart-shaped leaves completely cover the trailing stems, providing a long, ropey look. An easy-going and truly versatile plant that can be trained up a moss support, small trellis or topiary shape as well as drape luxuriously from a high shelf or hanging basket. Loves humidity and consistent moisture; can adapt to lower light conditions – perfect for a large terrarium or as a groundcover for a tall houseplant. Approximate Mature Indoor Length: 18-24” and Width: 8-10”
 - *Ficus pumila* ‘Quercifolia’ – Delicate, slightly cupped foliage resembles miniature oak leaves and curls densely around the long, trailing stems.
 - *Ficus pumila* ‘Variegata’ – Each small leaf is bordered in a narrow band of white for a charming, dappled appearance.
- **Fiddle-leaf Fig** / *Ficus lyrata* – Stiff and waxy with their characteristic wavy, pear- to violin-shape, these leaves are instantly recognizable whether in a chunky, shrub-like bush or on a dominating, well-branched tree. Combining a sculptural form with endearing whimsy, fiddle-leaf figs are wonderful anchor pieces for interior design and, with careful attention, can become long-lived friends. Very bright, indirect light, consistent temperatures, and allowing the soil to dry out slightly before watering will keep this beauty from becoming a drama queen. May be coaxed to branching with judicious pruning once desired height is obtained. Approximate Mature Indoor Height: 3-10’ and Width: 3-5’
- **Rubber Tree** / *Ficus elastica* – Thick, glossy, ebony-green oval leaves have distinctive pointy tips, pink mid-ribs and faintly pinkish rims. Less finicky and more adaptable than other *Ficus* plants, acclimating well to new spaces. Strong upright habit may be encouraged to branch at any point with pruning. Keep away from drafts and repot only when root-bound. Approximate Mature Indoor Height: 4-8’ and Width: 2-4’
 - *Ficus elastica* ‘Ruby’ – Dark, green-black leaves have distinctive pointy tips, with irregular rose and flamingo-pink margins and veining. Requires brighter light than other rubber plants in order to keep its vibrant coloring.
 - *Ficus elastica* ‘Tineke’ – Salmon pink points unfurl into large, smooth, glossy leaves that are cheerfully bright with creamy ivory borders and patches of deep green and sage. They have distinctive pointy tips, pale pinkish-yellow reverses with raspberry colored veining, and their branches are stiff and upright.
- **Weeping Fig** / *Ficus benjamina* – Small, glossy, almond-shaped leaves cover the canopy like a fairy-tale illustration. Perfect shape, smooth woody trunk and branches complete the picture, but like a finicky princess, somewhat difficult to manage: consistency is what this lovely indoor tree demands, so provide bright indirect light, even moisture, a permanent place to settle and keep away from drafts. Approximate Mature Indoor Height: 6-8’ and Width: 4-6’
 - *Ficus benjamina* ‘Danielle’ – Glossy, bright green leaves are coin-shaped and held upright in a densely branched, lollipop tree form.